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Review of: Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England by Lucia Zedner

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Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England by Lucia Zedner

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Lucia Zedner. *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England*. (Oxford Historical Monographs.) New York: The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press. 1991. Pp. 364. \$72.00.

This monograph traces the influence of gender-based ideology on attitudes towards female criminality and custody in nineteenth-century England. Female crime and punishment, Zedner insists, must be seen in the context of the ideal of femininity that created an important moralizing role for women in the Victorian period. Women were regarded as morally superior to men and were expected to maintain the respect of the family and act as dutiful wives and mothers. Any movement away from this norm of behavior, particularly by women engaged in crimes of morality, created much anxiety among the middle classes. This anxiety apparently grew towards the end of the century with the changing of image of a more public and active woman who was perceived as a further threat to domesticity.

Zedner points out that, although there was a relatively low rate of female crime, these moral and often victimless crimes were considered to extract a high social cost on the country. As a result, women who had been convicted for drinking or prostitution offenses were strongly stigmatized. Respectable society assumed that once a woman fell from virtue she found it almost impossible to regain it, and consequently was precluded from pursuing an honest living.

Female crime during the mid-Victorian period was seen to be the result of moral weakness, although Zedner states that most women were forced into crime by destitution and poor conditions. However, female criminality in the later nineteenth century was attributed to women's biological inferiority. Although positivist criminology, based on biological determinism, did not gain a strong foothold in England, medical explanations for female deviance became more common towards the end of the century. New experts labeled female criminal behavior as pathological rather than as the result of moral failing. Zedner remarks that this shift in explanation, which lessened moral condemnation, ironically "amplified the dangers associated with their condition" (p. 5). Public fears were stirred by the eugenic implications of female crime, leading to recommendations that feeble-minded women be prevented from procreating. Feeble-mindedness was a sufficiently elastic term to be used to embrace a wide range of social problems and to explain any loss of self-control by women.

Women sent to prison in Victorian England were subjected to regimes whose project was to enforce idealized femininity. Consequently, Zedner emphasizes, women received treatment different from men in both local and convict prisons. Instead of the quasi-militaristic masculine regimes, female prisons stressed reform inculcated by the personal influence of the staff. This individualized treatment aimed at moral regeneration rather than discipline, and was administered by an entirely female staff aided by middle-class philanthropic Lady Visitors.

In an attempt to redress the view of the prison taken from the words of reformers and official documents, Zedner examines the day-to-day realities of prison life for women in local jails where the majority of women were imprisoned. She argues that strict reformatory regimes were absent, regulations were evaded, and administrative decisions were often made on the basis of security and economy. Zedner emphasizes the importance of informal practices in the prisons and recognizes that much negotiation was carried out on a personal, even an emotional, level between the prisoners and the staff. Although Zedner brings to light previously unexamined aspects of female incarceration, her attempt to balance the accounts of revisionist historians is not entirely successful, as she is forced to rely on evidence of only

one local prison. Moreover, she reiterates at too great length historiographical arguments that are familiar to specialists in the field.

The study ends with a valuable discussion of Victorian's loss of faith in prison as an appropriate institution for women at the end of the century. Specialized reformatories became popular for feeble-minded and inebriate women who were clearly not reformed in local prisons. Zedner notes the trend away from treatment in a non-punitive and decriminalized atmosphere towards stricter control and indeterminant sentencing for feeble-minded women thought to be beyond reform. These women, now considered sick rather than sinners, were to be removed from prisons and placed in welfare oriented institutions for specialist treatment provided for by the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.

This study of female crime and custody in nineteenth-century England provides both the specialist and the general reader an important perspective on gender that is absent from previous studies. The work is written in a clear and direct style and is mercifully free of jargon. Read in conjunction with Martin Weiner's *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England, 1830-1914* (1990), which unfortunately Zedner was not able to consult before publication, this volume adds to our knowledge of Victorian crime and punishment. It is apparent that historians, looking at male and female crime and imprisonment, are looking beyond the confines of their specialization and are now connecting their findings to the wider philosophical and ideological framework of nineteenth-century society.

University of Puget Sound

DAVID F. SMITH

Jane Lewis. *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. 1991. Pp. vii, 338. \$39.50.

It has been a long time now, since students of late-nineteenth-century Britain were invited to look for the "origin" of the welfare state in the late Victorian and Edwardian years, to see its long and inexorable "rise" begin in the decade before the First World War, and to account for its development in the "shift" from individualism to collectivism. *Women and Social Action* pays attention to the work and writing of five women active in social welfare work from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and to the gendered concept of duty and citizenship that motivated the many kinds of voluntary work they undertook. In this way, it is a final nail in the coffin of an older historiography of state and social policy, but its biographical frame may prevent history students from understanding which former accounts are being amended and revised.

The lives of Octavia Hill, Beatrice Webb, Helen Bosanquet, Mary Ward, and Violet Markham span more than a century; but the focus of analysis is the years 1870 to 1920, and contemporary understandings of the voluntary work of upper middle-class women as a cornerstone of polity. Not the least that we might learn from *Women and Social Action* is how simplistic our recent categorizations of social life into "public and private" have been, how unrevealing our fracturing of the *polis* into the domestic and the civic realms, along the fault line of sex. Rather, as Lewis's account makes clear, the obligation of these women as *citizens* was to be womanly outside the family as well as within it, and by befriending the poor and exercising a pedagogy of feeling, to make citizens of them too. Through the perceptions of Octavia Hill and Beatrice Webb, Lewis describes particularly well the tensions that were involved in this kind of social work, the constant anxiety that its very